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ABSTRACT

A staff member of the Outdoor Adventures Program at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln relates his experience in supervising the construction of the first low ropes course in Yucatan, Mexico. During 1994, two staff members visited Yucatan to explore trip possibilities for the program and to inquire about a future conference location. While leading the men on a tour of the area, the director of the Yucatan Cultural Foundation discussed her experience participating in a ropes course and the need for such a facility in Yucatan. Consequently, planning of the ropes course was begun. The site selected for the course was Hacienda Tabi, a former sugar hacienda that covers nearly 40,000 acres. Coca-Cola of Yucatan provided funding for the project and members of the Mexican Conservation Corps provided labor. The Mexican Conservation Corps recruits student volunteers to work on community service projects during the summer. A total of 60 students aged 15-25, assisted with construction of the ropes course. During construction, student volunteers were taught about the elements that were being built, the philosophy of team building activities, and the history and development of group challenge activities in the United States. Using only hand tools, the volunteers cleared and prepared the site in 2 weeks. It became necessary to order some materials from the United States, and once the needed materials arrived, volunteers worked another 5 days to finish the project. The student volunteers were trained in safety, spotting, site management, and group dynamics. A University of Nebraska group was scheduled to visit the course in December 1995. (LP)

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¡Arriba! Building Teamwork and a Ropes Course in Mexico

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Abstract

Will classic Project Adventure-style challenges work in Latin America? After the construction of 10 low ropes course elements in Yucatan, Mexico, during the summer of 1995, the answer appears to be an emphatic "yes."

This project was spearheaded by the University of Nebraska-Lincoln, and came to fruition through cooperation with the Mexican Conservation Corps, Partners of the Americas, and the Yucatan Cultural Foundation, with funding by Coca-Cola of Yucatan, Mexico.

The following first-person narrative is by Scot Davis, Graduate Assistant for the Office of Campus Recreation Outdoor Adventures program at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln. Scot has led many trips into Mexico, and coordinated the construction of the first ropes course in Yucatan, Mexico.

Narrative

In October, 1994 I was asked to join the Assistant Director for Outdoor Recreation, Jim Fullerton, on a tour of Yucatan, Mexico. Leticia Roche, Director of the Yucatan Cultural Foundation, invited us to come down and explore trip possibilities for the Outdoor Adventures program (University of Nebraska-Lincoln), and a possible future conference site for the International Conference on Outdoor Recreation and Education (ICORE). Jim had met Leticia when she visited the United States in 1993 to see the new Arbor Day Foundation conference center in Nebraska City, Nebraska.

During this visit we were able to spend a great deal of time discovering the natural and cultural attractions of the Yucatan. One evening, on the drive back from the archeological site Uxmal and the Hacienda Tabi, we were discussing working with at-risk youth using different "outdoor" interventions including challenge courses. Leticia had visited (and participated in) a ropes course in Nebraska during her visit the previous year. This experience made her very familiar with the feelings of accomplishment and increased self-esteem that go along with participation in challenge course activities. Our discussion continued and we discovered a void that needed to be filled. There were no challenge facilities in Yucatan for groups to use. We decided to pursue the idea of constructing the first ropes course for the people of Yucatan to use.

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During the next nine months, plans were made for funding and construction. The site was to be the Hacienda Tabi. Tabi[1] is five-hundred years old! During its peak as a working sugar hacienda it employed 2,500 indentured servants and covered an area of nearly 40,000 acres. Tabi is also in a central location on the Yucatan Peninsula. Funding was granted by Coca-Cola of Yucatan for the amount of 20,000 pesos (approximately $3,500 U.S.). Construction was to be supervised by myself and built with the human-power of the Mexican Conservation Corps[2] directed by Sal Munoz.

Most of the equipment and parts were thought to available in Mexico. Mexico has very high import taxes to discourage any non-Mexican made products from being used in Mexico. To begin with I brought 500' of braided rope[3], large steel washers, and my climbing and safety equipment. The plans were set and on the morning of July 20th, 1995 the journey began.

My tasks, during my stay in Mexico, turned out to be two-fold. Construction of a ten element ropes course was the first priority. I soon discovered, however, that the students who were working with me had never had any "new games" or initiatives facilitated with them. This became a daily ritual. Let the juegos (games) begin!

A little about the group I was working with... The Mexican Conservation Corps is based out of Mérida, which is the capital of Yucatan. Sal Munoz, who transferred directly from the California Conservation Corps, is the full-time director in Mexico. For the summer of '95 he had 60 students volunteering for the 28 day experience. There were two projects at Tabi, the ropes course and the construction of an authentic Mayan house (hut) and adjoining kitchen. Two other "out" projects were also underway. One, in Punta Lagunas, worked on constructing a nature trail through an estuary along the coastline. The final project was in Chiapas, repairing and improving homes in the area. The 60 students, who ranged from 15 to 25 years of age, were divided into four groups of 15, and rotated (weekly) through the four projects. At any point in time there were 30 students at Tabi.

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1 Tabi has been "given" to the Yucatan Cultural Foundation, for a 10 year period, by the Mexico government for restoration and economic development for tourist dollars.

2 The Mexican Conservation Corps is an offshoot of the California Conservation Corps and has been funded and developed by Partners for the Americas out of Washington D.C., and overseen by John Chater who is the Regional Program Coordinator for Partners.

3 All technical equipment for the course at Tabi was purchased from Starlight Outdoor Education Products out of West Virginia, USA.

Our daily schedule was as follows: Desayuno (breakfast) was at 7:00a.m. We worked from 8:00a.m. to 1:00p.m. and then had lunch (almuerzo)[1]. Siesta was until 4:00p.m. during which time some slept, others played soccer, and some did laundry[2]. Presentations and free time were until 7:00p.m. which was time for dinner. The remainder of the evening was free time.

I did two presentations, one for each set of two groups, at Tabi. We discussed each element being built, philosophy of team building and group building activities, and the history and development of the "group challenge" idea in the United States. This lasted about an hour, then the fun began...the juegos[3] (games). Whether it was Magic Shoes , or Boggy's Marsh, or Human Knot, or whatever, they loved them all. This was probably the best part of my experience. There was such an incredible hunger for this kind of programming. Students and leaders alike simply could not get enough time playing. In my mind, this is a very strong statement on the need for humans (especially adults) to play[4].

During all this fun we had the not-so-small task of constructing a low ropes course, in the jungle of Yucatan, with only hand tools[5]. My first task was to select a site for the course. We chose one of the abandoned corrals. It was a large area (approximately 300' X 300') and was surrounded by a stone wall, built by the earlier occupants, which had two entrances with large iron gates. The following elements were chosen to be built:

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1 In Mexico, the almuerzo is the largest of all three daily meals. It is basically a small feast intended to nourish the body from the morning's work, and provide enough energy to get through the day. It is typically very high in complex carbohydrates, low in fat, and extremely necessary (by noon the temperature could easily be over 100%f with 75% to 100% relative humidity).

2 We did laundry on what used to be Tabi's horse feeding area. This was a concrete covered slab approximately 30 feet long, four feet high, two feet deep (parallel to the ground), and somewhat concave so the oats and hay would tend to stay in the trough. A little soap, a little water, a scrub brush, and a lot of scrubbing (by hand), and voilá clean (mostly) laundry.

3 I use the term juegos because it became a daily ritual, either in the late afternoon or after dinner, for the group to begin shouting, "¡JUEGOS!, ¡JUEGOS!, ¡JUEGOS!!!" This was my invitation to provide a new "super cool" group initiative or game for the group.

4 According to Dr. Donald Greer, Assistant Professor of Recreation and Leisure Studies at the University of Nebraska-Omaha, play is defined as spontaneous, non-extrinsically motivated interaction for the sake of pure enjoyment.

5 We did rent the use of two gentlemen and their chainsaw (for cutting the phone poles) for about an hour.

Tire Traverse, Balance Beam, Triangle Traverse/Wild Woosy, Giant's Finger, Wobbly Log, three Trust Falls, Re-Birth, Nitro Crossing, and Spider's Web[1].

The next step was to "clear" the area. We created kind of a horizontal "ant farm" for our layout. The elements were to be in isolated areas (in the corral) and interconnected by a trail system. With shovels, rakes, sickles, machetes, hand saws, bow saws, and two wheelbarrows, we did it; and we managed to avoid the snakes[2], scorpions, gila monsters, and miscellaneous other hazards in doing so!

Following the clearing, we had to dig a series of 13 holes for the postas (telephone poles). With a nice gas-powered auger this would be a lot of work. With shovels and pry-bars, and having to go through a limestone layer, this was A LOT OF WORK! (For the record, it took us two weeks to prepare the course and five days to build it.)

Finally we were ready to build the elements. Unfortunately, we were still without the telephone poles, and a majority of the parts which I needed were actually unavailable in Mexico. The nearest city to Tabi is Ochtucab and it had only one "long distance" telephone which was in the local pharmacy. After four days of seemingly endless "phone" frustration, and three nights of wondering if all the work up to this point was futile, I finally got through to Starlight Outdoor Education in West Virginia. Not only did they have the equipment I needed in stock, and could ship it second day air to Mexico[3], but they were willing to wait and receive payment until I returned from the Yucatan. (We can not thank them enough for their willingness to help and go the EXTRA mile!)

The phone poles came, we cut them (actually the rent-a-cutters did that), sunk them, cemented them. The parts arrived, and after two days of continuous rain, we built the first ropes course in Yucatan, and to the best of my knowledge, the first ropes course in Mexico. On Friday, August 12, 1995, we dedicated and celebrated (with champagne, cake, singing, and much enthusiasm) this the "Premiere Curso de Desafios en México[4]" (Sal Munoz, Dedication Ceremony, 1995). The students would not stay away and for the next day and a half I trained their Sombras in safety, spotting, site management, and group

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1 These same elements were constructed in 1995 at the University of Nebraska challenge course at Camp Easter Seal near Milford, Nebraska. It is hoped that "staff exchanges" will be possible if funding is available.

2 Two days after I left, one of the sombras (leaders) was bitten by a rattlesnake. They rushed him to the nearby "hospital", and he is doing fine!

3 Actually it took seven days for the equipment to reach Mérida. Two days to Mexico City, and five days (to find it in Mexico City) to Mérida. Don't get me wrong -I LOVE MEXICO! There is simply an adjustment of the interpretation time which has to be made in order to stay sane.

4 First Challenge Course in Mexico.

dynamics/processing. I am scheduled to return in April of 1996 to conduct a more extensive training with the staff for the 1996 summer Conservation Corps. And, I am very excited to be taking the first group of Americans through the course on a University of Nebraska Outdoor Adventures trip to the Yucatan, December 27, 1995 - January 6, 1996. The course weathered both hurricanes this fall and has had a number of groups facilitated through the experience since its construction. It will also be used for pre- or post-conference activities for the 1997 ICORE at the University of Yucatan.

I would like to personally thank: Noelle Davis, Jim Fullerton, Dr. Frank Brasile, Leticia Roche, Donna Rudolph[1], Sal Munoz, John Chater, the students of the 1995 Mexican Conservation Corps, the University of Nebraska-Lincoln, the Office of Campus Recreation, the Outdoor Adventures Program, Starlight Outdoor Education Products, the Yucatan Cultural Foundation, the Mexican Conservation Corps, Partners of the Americas, and Coca-Cola of Yucatan for making this vision take form and become a reality!

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1 U.S. Representative of the Yucatan Cultural Foundation.